

BY
ALLAN MONKHOUSE

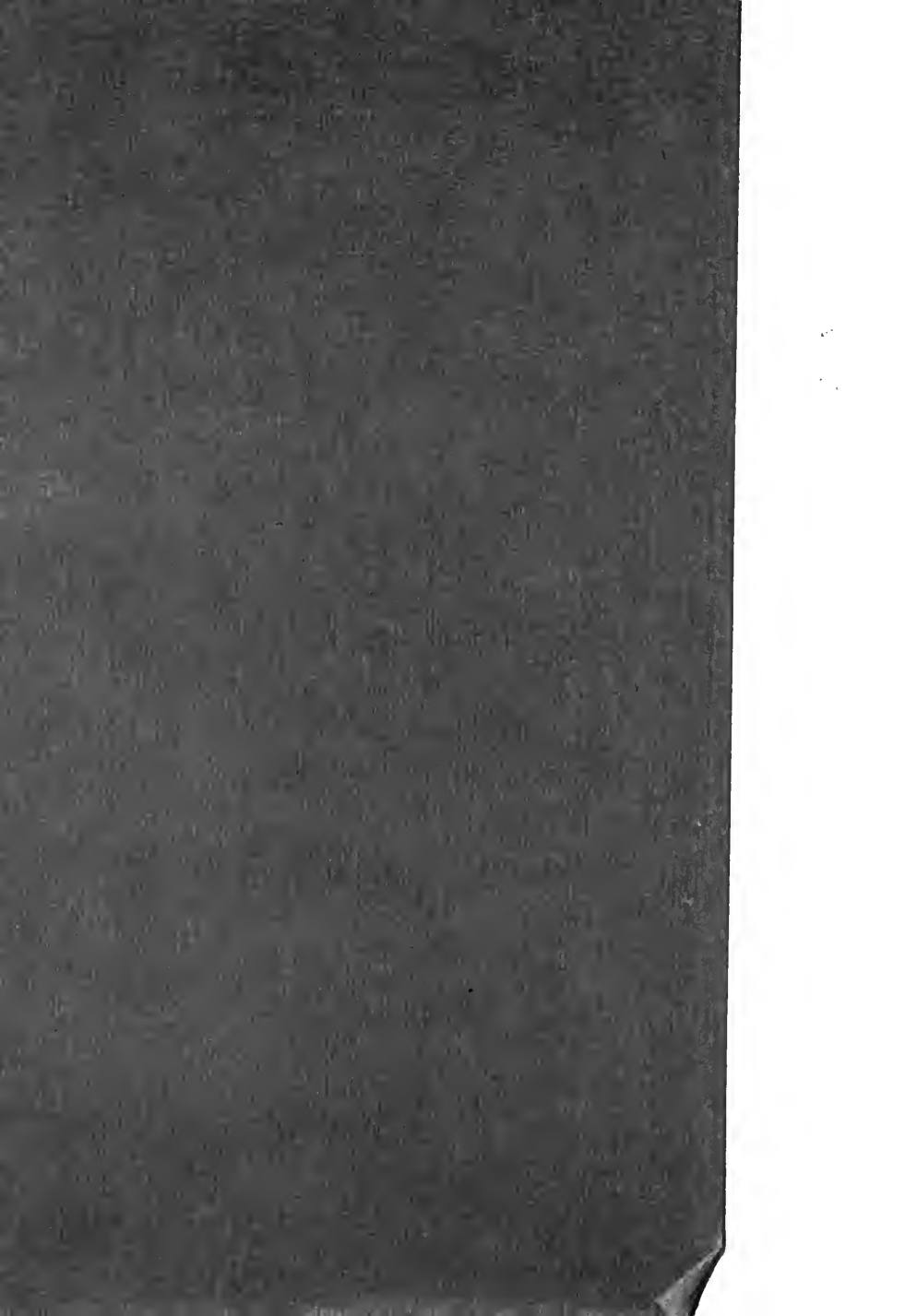
BY

ALLAN MONKHOUSE



LONDON

CONSTABLE & COMPANY LTD.



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WAR PLAYS



"THE CHOICE" was performed by Miss Horniman's Company six years ago, and subsequently at Liverpool by a company which initiated "repertory" there. The other two plays have not yet been performed.

WAR PLAYS

BY

ALLAN MONKHOUSE

AUTHOR OF "MARY BROOME: A COMEDY,"

"FOUR TRAGEDIES," ETC.



LONDON

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1916

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SHAMED LIFE

A PLAY IN ONE ACT

CHARACTERS

CLAUDE PLASSEY.

MRS. PLASSEY.

MRS. BOWES.

ISABEL ROWLAND.

SHAMED LIFE

SCENE

*The sitting-room of a small house in a village street.
At the back is a French window opening to the garden.
On this summer morning the window is open. On
the left is the window looking down upon the street,
for the house is higher at that side than at the other.
On the right is the door leading to the other parts
of the house. The room is furnished well and in
good taste. CLAUDE is lying upon a sofa, smoking
a pipe and gazing gloomily into vacancy. MRS.
PLASSEY enters from the house.*

MRS. PLASSEY.

BY the bye, Claude, Mrs. Bowes is coming this morning for some eggs.

CLAUDE.

Is that girl with her?

MRS. PLASSEY.

She's there still. I don't know if she's coming.

CLAUDE.

Well, I hope she isn't.

MRS. PLASSEY.

Why?

S H A M E D L I F E

CLAUDE.

They give themselves airs—these people with their men at the front.

MRS. PLASSEY.

Now, don't talk about it, Claude.

CLAUDE.

Jim Bowes is coming home to marry her when he gets leave.

MRS. PLASSEY.

They oughtn't to do it like that. They ought to wait till it's all over.

CLAUDE.

But he may be dead. Let the poor devil have something.

MRS. PLASSEY.

Claude, I believe it would be good for you to get away from here for a time. I don't see why you should give up the idea of Oxford.

CLAUDE.

It's impossible. It's impossible to go there now. And I'm getting too old.

MRS. PLASSEY.

All the same, it isn't good for you to stay on here.

CLAUDE.

Well, you don't want me to go to the war.

MRS. PLASSEY.

No, no.

S H A M E D L I F E

CLAUDE.

Of course, if it were not for you—

MRS. PLASSEY.

I know. It's my selfishness. I know I'm keeping you.

CLAUDE.

Honestly, I can't say that the thing's in my line but—

MRS. PLASSEY.

It's my fault. I can't let you go.

CLAUDE.

You've only to say the word. [*She looks at him earnestly, questioningly, and he continues rather hurriedly.*] It's not the sort of thing I'm cut out for, I know. You want blunt, hardy creatures; the old type of mercenary. For a sensitive, modern man it's impossible. They do it, but it's impossible.

MRS. PLASSEY.

Yes, it's impossible.

CLAUDE. [*Muttering.*]

They'll get me yet.

MRS. PLASSEY.

What did you say?

CLAUDE.

Of course I'm a single man—a young man.

MRS. PLASSEY.

The only son of a widow is not a single man. It's mothers, mothers they should think about, not wives. You may have a dozen wives.

S H A M E D L I F E

CLAUDE. [*Laughing mirthlessly.*]
Easy, mother.

MRS. PLASSEY.

And why should they take the young? The old should go first—the middle-aged. They've had their life. They've had something. It's so unfair.

CLAUDE.

But, my dear mother, the old can't fight.

MRS. PLASSEY.

Forty's as good as twenty. Let them go first.

CLAUDE.

I don't think it's quite practicable.

MRS. PLASSEY.

Youth is the time for joy, love, adventure.

[*She stops suddenly.*]

CLAUDE.

Adventure!

MRS. PLASSEY. [*In a lower key.*]

Everything is an adventure then.

CLAUDE.

Love and adventure. That's what Jim Bowes is getting. [*He rises from the sofa, goes to the window and looks out upon the street.*] By God! He's getting the quintessence of it.

MRS. PLASSEY. [*Eagerly.*]

What? What, Claude?

S H A M E D L I F E

CLAUDE.

Nothing. What's that?

*[The distant sound of drum and fife is heard.
They stand listening as it comes nearer.]*

MRS. PLASSEY.

They're recruiting here again.

CLAUDE.

They'll have me yet.

MRS. PLASSEY.

Don't talk like that, Claude. You've a free will.

CLAUDE.

Have I?

MRS. PLASSEY.

If you must go—if you will go—

CLAUDE.

Now, now, now. No more of that.

[The band comes nearer and the two move about the room in nervous excitement. CLAUDE takes up a newspaper, glances at it and throws it down in irritation. He crosses to the window and looks out, returning immediately. His mother picks up the newspaper, watches him, reads surreptitiously and puts it aside hastily. As the band passes under the window they are like tormented creatures hiding their agitation from one another.]

MRS. PLASSEY.

Horrible noise.

S H A M E D L I F E

CLAUDE.

What have you done with the paper? Where is it?

MRS. PLASSEY.

Let 's stop the paper—give it up.

CLAUDE.

It would look queer to do that.

[He takes the paper again but throws it down after reading something.]

MRS. PLASSEY.

It's time you fed the hens. And Mrs. Bowes will want a dozen eggs if you can get them.

CLAUDE. *[Listening to the receding sound of the band.]*
The hens. Certainly. The hens.

[He goes into the garden. MRS. PLASSEY watches him out, takes up the paper again, reads, crushes it in her hands, straightens it out again, hides it under a cushion. MRS. BOWES and ISABEL ROWLAND are seen passing the French window.]

MRS. PLASSEY. *[Calls out to them.]*

Come in this way. Good morning.

[They come in. Amenities.]

MRS. BOWES.

What a lovely summer day!

MRS. PLASSEY.

Isn't it? Claude has just gone to see if he can find any eggs for you. Perhaps you saw him?

S H A M E D L I F E

ISABEL.

I think he was just going round the corner of the house.

MRS. PLASSEY. [*To MRS. BOWES, kindly and yet with a little stiffness.*]

Good news of your son, I hope.

MRS. BOWES.

We heard this morning. He's all right.

MRS. PLASSEY.

It's very dreadful for you.

MRS. BOWES.

They were going to attack.

MRS. PLASSEY. [*To ISABEL.*]

And you, my dear; I understand that when he comes home—soon, I hope—you are to be married.

ISABEL.

Yes. He expects to have a few days leave in a week or two.

MRS. PLASSEY.

Well, well; I hope you'll be very happy.

ISABEL.

Thank you, Mrs. Plassey.

MRS. PLASSEY.

Excuse me. I'll just see what Claude is doing.

[*She goes out.*]

ISABEL.

There's something tragical about that woman.

S H A M E D L I F E

MRS. BOWES.

Why should there be? She's got her son at home.

ISABEL.

Looking after the hens.

MRS. BOWES.

It's strange, isn't it?

ISABEL.

How safe and pleasant it is! Oh! my dear, I can't imagine anything happier than for you and me and Jim to be here looking after the hens.

MRS. BOWES.

Do you think they're happy?

ISABEL.

I think they must be wretched. She is.

MRS. BOWES.

Belle! You told Sally where we were going.

ISABEL.

Yes, yes, dear.

MRS. BOWES.

And that if a telegram came—

ISABEL.

Of course. Yes. You silly old thing, how often must I tell you?

MRS. BOWES.

I ought to have spoken to her myself. I think I'll go back. You'll bring the eggs along.

S H A M E D L I F E

ISABEL.

Nonsense. I told her plainly that if any telegram came she must follow us here. But there'll be no telegram. Why should there?

MRS. BOWES.

What did she say?

ISABEL.

She said she'd run all the way.

MRS. BOWES.

She's a good girl.

ISABEL.

Now, don't bother.

MRS. BOWES.

I'm fey, my dear.

ISABEL.

Why do you say that? And it wouldn't be you that was fey.

MRS. BOWES.

Isn't his doom mine?

ISABEL.

You musn't. You musn't.

MRS. BOWES.

I say to myself—dead or wounded? Just a hope that it may be wounded.

ISABEL.

And dead is better than feeding hens.

S H A M E D L I F E

MRS. BOWES.

Don't say it. Don't say it.

[MRS. PLASSEY *appears at the French window.*

MRS. PLASSEY.

Mrs. Bowes!

[MRS. BOWES *goes to her and the two move out of sight. ISABEL makes to follow and hesitates. She listens to a distant drum. CLAUDE enters from the house.*

CLAUDE.

Oh!

ISABEL.

Good morning. How d'you do? [*They shake hands stiffly.*]

CLAUDE. [*Looking for a way of escape.*]

I thought that you had—beautiful morning, isn't it?

ISABEL.

Your mother and Mrs. Bowes have gone to look at the hens, I think.

CLAUDE.

Oh! Yes. The hens. I hope Jim's all right—Jim Bowes.

ISABEL.

Yes, thank you.

CLAUDE.

Getting along all right, I hope.

ISABEL.

I hope so.

S H A M E D L I F E

CLAUDE.

Won't you sit down?

ISABEL.

I think I must go and look for Mrs. Bowes.

CLAUDE.

Oh, yes.

ISABEL.

How are the hens getting on, Mr. Plassey?

CLAUDE.

Are you interested in hens?

ISABEL.

Well, they're not very companionable, are they?

CLAUDE.

Think of a man without a friend in the world—only hens.

ISABEL.

What?

CLAUDE.

Oh, it's only an idea I had. I'll tell you a strange thing, though. An old brooding hen, yonder, has left her eggs.

ISABEL.

Why?

CLAUDE.

I think there was a dog fight that scared her. Got excited. It's unnatural to leave the eggs.

S H A M E D L I F E

ISABEL.

Is this some sort of parable, Mr. Plassey?

CLAUDE.

What d'you mean? I'm telling you what happened.

ISABEL.

I suppose hens *are* very interesting.

CLAUDE.

No, they're not.

ISABEL.

Very well; they're not.

CLAUDE.

You think looking after hens is a poor occupation—in these times.

ISABEL.

I don't say so.

CLAUDE.

No, but you think it.

ISABEL.

My thoughts are my own, Mr. Plassey.

CLAUDE.

I see what's in your mind.

ISABEL.

I *am* curious about you. It's not for me to judge. There's your mother. When I see that poor woman—I mean Mrs. Bowes—when I see her hankering after her son I could think it wrong of him to go—to stay away from her.

S H A M E D L I F E

CLAUDE.

But you—why do you speak of her? It's you that's going to marry him.

ISABEL.

We will not talk of that.

CLAUDE.

You despise me.

ISABEL.

It's not my business. And don't talk of despising. I don't know you. I don't understand you.

CLAUDE.

But you're interested in my—my psychology.

ISABEL.

Well—if you'll let me be. I don't want to be impertinent.

CLAUDE.

It's simple enough. I'm her only child. It would break her heart.

ISABEL.

It's hard for you.

CLAUDE.

Well, but—this war. It's not in my line. Don't blame my mother. I suppose I could break away.

ISABEL.

Why not, then?

CLAUDE.

I don't see why we should talk about this at all.

S H A M E D L I F E

ISABEL.

I agree, I agree, Mr. Plassey.

CLAUDE.

You're a high and mighty person with a lover at the war. You're hard. You're like steel. Jim Bowes is a hero, of course. You're all for heroes.

ISABEL.

Don't let's talk of it. Come out and look for them.

CLAUDE.

I must talk to somebody. You don't know—you don't know.

ISABEL.

Yes, yes. Do talk to me. I don't think I'm hard. I have to be. We're strung up—we women—but perhaps I may understand. Oh! We must all help one another.

CLAUDE.

My mother—I'll tell you something. You know that she keeps me here.

ISABEL.

Yes.

CLAUDE.

And yet in her heart—in her heart—I believe she would—she would—she wants me to go.

ISABEL.

Do you mean?—

CLAUDE.

There's a confession. Now, do you despise me?

S H A M E D L I F E

ISABEL.
Not yet.

CLAUDE.
What more d'you want?

ISABEL.
It's very strange.

CLAUDE.
Isn't it?

ISABEL.
Let me understand.

CLAUDE.
We're not all heroes like Jim Bowes. How d'you know he's one?

ISABEL.
Silence!

CLAUDE.
I beg your pardon.

ISABEL.
Go on.

CLAUDE.
My mother thinks I'm a coward. I suppose I am. She dreads it for me. For herself, too, I daresay. But she shields me. D'you see? She won't let me go. If I went—boldly, gallantly—she would be happy. Perhaps.

ISABEL.
What mothers are!

CLAUDE.
Curious case, isn't it?

S H A M E D L I F E

ISABEL.

And you?

CLAUDE.

Well, what do you think of me?

ISABEL.

I tell you I don't understand you.

CLAUDE.

I might have taken the plunge at first.

ISABEL.

Why not now?

CLAUDE.

I hate war. I hate war.

ISABEL.

So do we all.

CLAUDE.

Not like me.

ISABEL.

Are you like the Quakers? Non-resistance? That sort of thing? I sometimes think Tolstoy's right. I can respect anyone who honestly believes like that and braves the world. Is that it?

CLAUDE.

I'd like to think that's it.

ISABEL.

What then?

CLAUDE.

We've had enough of this.

S H A M E D L I F E

ISABEL.

You can't stop now.

CLAUDE.

Jim Bowes may be dead. He may have a bullet in his brain at this moment.

ISABEL.

You brute! Why do you say that?

CLAUDE.

Eh! There was a time when I thought of old England like the rest. And I liked to play at soldiers when I was a boy. Why didn't I go? I might have been at peace now.

ISABEL.

It's not too late.

CLAUDE.

No.

ISABEL.

Are you simply a coward?

CLAUDE.

Simply a coward? There are a thousand ways of being a coward.

ISABEL.

And only one way.

CLAUDE.

Why should I die? I love my life.

ISABEL.

Is that it?

CLAUDE.

What can you give me for it?

S H A M E D L I F E

ISABEL.

He that loveth his life—

CLAUDE.

Oh, yes, yes, yes. I know that. What does it mean? I want realities. I want to get to the bottom of things. I know this talk about romance and honour and sacrifice. Look out there; look in the garden. Think of me—no; think of Jim Bowes lying there with a bullet in his heart! What are the flowers and the sunshine to him? What are your love and the world's respect? What's an epitaph and a word in the newspapers? You're all stupid. He's dead.

ISABEL.

He lives. This life isn't all.

CLAUDE.

Let those who believe that go and fight.

ISABEL.

Brave men go, whatever they believe.

CLAUDE.

What is bravery?

ISABEL.

It's many things. It's unselfishness. It's justice. It's imagination.

CLAUDE.

I'm young. I've not had my share.

ISABEL.

What is life if everyone despises you?

CLAUDE.

Yes, you force us to it. You hound us on.

S H A M E D L I F E

ISABEL.

It's you that's stupid. You're depraved. You're a monster. Self, Self. No, no; I see it. I understand you. But you mustn't speak of these things. You mustn't betray yourself.

CLAUDE.

After all, what is life to me now? And we must die some time. We can't escape.

ISABEL.

It is better to die a hero young than to live a long, mean life.

CLAUDE.

Look out into the garden again. Look away at the fields and the trees. What is there in these that will despise me? I've the sun and the clouds. I've all the animals and the birds. I'm one with them.

ISABEL.

They fight. They prey on one another.

CLAUDE.

Yes. But they've none of these points of honour. They don't die willingly.

ISABEL.

A dog will die for his master.

CLAUDE.

Nonsense. It doesn't know what death is.

ISABEL.

Do we?

S H A M E D L I F E

CLAUDE.

It's to fall down and rot. To rot in the twinkling of an eye.

ISABEL.

Oh, you're mad.

CLAUDE.

I've never said all this before. I've hardly thought it.

ISABEL.

And why to me, now?

CLAUDE.

Why, indeed?

ISABEL.

And yet—you have courage of a sort to say it.

CLAUDE.

It's hardly decent, is it?

ISABEL.

You mustn't go so deep—or you must go deeper.

CLAUDE.

Deeper?

ISABEL. [*Passionately.*]

Don't you see that all the world will be wrong to you? It is—it is, now. What good is the sunshine to you and the clouds and things? Why, the world's gone sour. You can't live as you are. Yes, we are all one with it. You can't be alone. You can't be yourself. That's it. You want to be yourself, to

S H A M E D L I F E

possess yourself, to be alone. You eat out your heart, my poor boy. Give all you have. Give the dearest thing you have.

[She breaks into sobs and turns away. He stares past her into the garden. She recovers, and as he seems about to speak, raises her hand in warning. MRS. PLASSEY and MRS. BOWES enter from the garden. MRS. BOWES carries a basket with eggs, which she presently puts down.]

MRS. BOWES.

Oh! Here you are. How d'you do, Claude?

CLAUDE.

How d'you do?

MRS. BOWES.

Well, we must be getting back.

CLAUDE.

I'm glad to hear Jim's all right.

MRS. BOWES.

So far. Yes.

CLAUDE.

Oh, he'll be all right.

MRS. BOWES.

Why?

CLAUDE.

He'll have good luck. He'll get a D.S.O., you'll see.

MRS. BOWES.

That means he'll be in great danger.

S H A M E D L I F E

MRS. PLASSEY.

I've been selfish. I wouldn't let Claude go.

MRS. BOWES.

He wants to go?

MRS. PLASSEY.

I couldn't bear it.

MRS. BOWES.

Can I bear it?

MRS. PLASSEY.

He has sacrificed himself for me.

CLAUDE.

Mother, mother—

[*He looks at ISABEL.*]

MRS. BOWES.

Come, Belle. [*They make to go out together. MRS. BOWES hesitates and turns back. She walks up to MRS. PLASSEY and speaks quietly.*] You must let him go. I know what you feel. I'm a happier woman than you.

MRS. PLASSEY.

And yet, any day, you may hear—

MRS. BOWES.

Sooner or later, I shall hear—

ISABEL.

No.

MRS. BOWES.

No, my dear. You're right. I should not have said that.

S H A M E D L I F E

ISABEL.

You must not think it.

MRS. BOWES.

I'll try not to, dear. I ought to think more of you.

MRS. PLASSEY.

And you are happy?

MRS. BOWES.

Happier than you, I said. [*After a pause.*] Less miserable.

MRS. PLASSEY.

Claude and I are happy here.

[*CLAUDE laughs suddenly.*]

ISABEL. [*To him in a low voice.*]:

You are cruel.

MRS. PLASSEY. [*In agitation.*]

Why should we let our boys go?

MRS. BOWES.

We cannot keep them.

MRS. PLASSEY.

I am keeping Claude.

MRS. BOWES.

Does he want to go?

MRS. PLASSEY.

Yes.

CLAUDE.

No.

S H A M E D L I F E

MRS. PLASSEY.

What do you mean? You know, Claude—

CLAUDE.

I know that you are trying to protect me.

MRS. PLASSEY. [*Fiercely.*]

I will not let him go. He shall not go.

CLAUDE.

Poor mother! It hasn't been very difficult to keep me.

MRS. PLASSEY.

What is it, Claude? I don't understand.

CLAUDE. [*He turns to MRS. BOWES.*]

Don't blame her. She knew I wouldn't go and so she pretended that she kept me.

MRS. PLASSEY.

No.

CLAUDE.

Yes, mother.

MRS. BOWES.

Why did you let her keep you here?

CLAUDE.

I suppose I'm naturally a coward.

MRS. BOWES.

How can you say it? How can you acknowledge it?

ISABEL.

Because he has courage. He has courage.

S H A M E D L I F E

MRS. BOWES.
Courage?

ISABEL.
Yes, courage to look into his own soul.

CLAUDE.
Or am I so low that it doesn't matter?

MRS. BOWES.
But can he be afraid—afraid to go? Are there men like that?

ISABEL.
There are thousands. Thousands. But they pretend.

CLAUDE.
Yes, I read a funny story the other day. Quite a funny story. It was about three men who didn't volunteer for something. The captain or the colonel or somebody asked them for their reasons. The first said that he had rheumatism and the second that he had heart disease. But the third man said: 'Same as t'others. I'm feart'.
[*He laughs hysterically.*]

MRS. PLASSEY.
How can you—how can you—

ISABEL.
It's horrible. It's horrible. You make a mockery of yourself.

CLAUDE.
Yes. Can death be worse than this?

ISABEL.
There's time to choose, yet.

SHAMED LIFE

MRS. PLASSEY. [*Doggedly.*]
I cannot permit him to go.

CLAUDE.

It's such a narrow line that divides. Go or stay. Hero or coward. Such a little step. One might be either. Skulking behind the hens or running to meet danger. Running—[*he has wandered to the window and stands looking out*] like this woman running up the street.

MRS. BOWES.
What!

ISABEL. [*At the window.*]
It is.

[*She rushes out.*]

MRS. PLASSEY.
What is it?

MRS. BOWES.

A telegram, perhaps. Why does she run? It may be good news or it may be no news at all. She said she would run. It will be to say when he is coming home. There is no cause for apprehension. [ISABEL comes in hastily, holding a telegram in her hands.]
Open it.

[*As ISABEL does so MRS. BOWES snatches and the telegram falls to the ground. They pounce on it together. They are on their knees when MRS. BOWES opens it and they scan it together. They remain buddled together on the floor.*]

CLAUDE.
What is it? What is it?

S H A M E D L I F E

MRS. BOWES. [*As MRS. PLASSEY reaches out her hand for the telegram.*]

What have you to do with it? [*She rises. They both rise. She hands the telegram courteously to MRS. PLASSEY.*] Forgive me.

CLAUDE. [*Looking over his mother's shoulder.*]
He's dead then.

MRS. BOWES.
You may envy him.

MRS. PLASSEY. [*To MRS. BOWES.*]
I don't know what to say to you. I am so grieved.

MRS. BOWES.
I am very sorry for you.

MRS. PLASSEY.
For me?

MRS. BOWES.
And for your son.

MRS. PLASSEY. [*Looking at the two women in their pride.*]
I cannot bear it, Claude.

CLAUDE.
You shall bear it no longer.

MRS. BOWES.
Come, Isabel.

ISABEL.
Yes. What did he say?

S H A M E D L I F E

CLAUDE.

Listen !

[Far away is the sound of the drum. It grows nearer, fitfully.]

MRS. PLASSEY.

I have held him back. I would not let him go.

CLAUDE.

There's the call. I hear it now.

MRS. BOWES.

Come, Isabel.

ISABEL.

What is he saying?

MRS. BOWES.

It cannot matter now. How can you think of that now?

ISABEL. *[To CLAUDE.]*

What is it? Tell me.

MRS. BOWES.

Isabel !

ISABEL.

Jim's killed. Oh, yes; I know. *[To CLAUDE.]*
You'll go now?

CLAUDE. Yes.

[ISABEL looks at him steadily and then takes Mrs. Bowes's arm.]

S H A M E D L I F E

Mrs. BOWES.

We must not forget our eggs.

*[She takes up the basket and she and ISABEL
pass out through the open window.]*

*Mrs. BOWES turns slightly and inclines
her head.*

Mrs. PLASSEY.

What does it mean?

CLAUDE.

I think it means, for me, that the bitterness of death
is past.

Mrs. PLASSEY.

Why?

CLAUDE.

I don't know. One makes a choice.

Mrs. PLASSEY.

What did she say to you? What were you talking
about with that girl?

CLAUDE.

I made a confession. Yes, I confessed my sins.

Mrs. PLASSEY.

To her!

CLAUDE.

Ah! You loved me too much.

Mrs. PLASSEY.

You are not going to the war? I cannot bear—

CLAUDE.

No more of that, mother.

S H A M E D L I F E

MRS. PLASSEY.

What has changed you? What has happened?

CLAUDE.

Jim Bowes is killed. How can I stay?

MRS. PLASSEY.

But thousands were killed before.

CLAUDE.

It's strange, I know.

MRS. PLASSEY.

That girl—that girl—

CLAUDE.

No, mother; she's nothing to me. Only a voice. A voice. Hark! *[The band is coming nearer.]*

MRS. PLASSEY. *[Cries out.]*

Yes, yes; you must go.

[They embrace. He disengages himself and goes out, pausing for a moment to watch her as she falls on her knees with her face to the window. The band approaches playing clamorously. Then a chorus of voices breaks out, the band accompanying.]

“Lovers and sons and husbands dear,

Hark to the call;

Farewell sloth and farewell fear,

One and all;

Hark! It's the call of the drum and fife

To the great adventure—death or life;

One and all

Hark to the call.”

[The voices cease and the band breaks out again as the curtain falls.]

NIGHT WATCHES

A COMEDY IN ONE ACT

CHARACTERS

A NURSE.

A NIGHT-ORDERLY.

FIRST SOLDIER.

SECOND SOLDIER.

NIGHT WATCHES

SCENE

An ante-room to the wards in a small Red Cross Hospital. The door is at the back and it leads to a landing out of which the wards—a large and a small bedroom—open. In the room are a clock showing clearly the time—a few minutes after ten—a fire with an armchair before it, a coalscuttle, a low camp bed covered by a blanket, a small table on which is a tray covered by a tablecloth, a stand with a spirit lamp and kettle, etc. A nurse enters with the night-orderly. He is an ordinary citizen of middle age; she is a comely woman of middle age.

NURSE.

THIS is your room. Plenty of coal, I think? It gets rather chilly in the middle of the night.

ORDERLY.

Thank you very much. What about that bed? Am I supposed to go to sleep?

NURSE.

Oh, I think so. Unless you're a very heavy sleeper. Of course, you make your rounds every two or three hours. But you'll find all quiet, I think. We've no troublesome cases—unless—no, I don't think you'll be disturbed.

NIGHT WATCHES

ORDERLY. [*Pointing to the tray.*]
What's that?

NURSE.

That's your tray. [*She half uncovers it, displaying teapot, loaf, etc.*] There are biscuits in this paper bag.

ORDERLY.

I shan't want anything.

NURSE.

Yes, they all say that at first.

ORDERLY.

No, but really—

NURSE.

Here's the tea-caddy.

ORDERLY.

I never take anything after dinner.

NURSE.

And here's the toasting fork.

ORDERLY.

I don't think I shall want it.

NURSE. [*Looking into the kettle.*]

You'd better light this spirit lamp in good time. It takes some time to boil. Or you could use the fire.

ORDERLY.

You're very good. But—

NURSE.

If you can spend a night with a good cup of tea staring at you you're very different from most people.

NIGHT WATCHES

ORDERLY. [*Relenting.*]

Oh, I'm quite an ordinary person.

NURSE.

Yes; most people are.

ORDERLY.

I do rather like the idea of a round of hot buttered toast.

NURSE.

I don't think you'll be satisfied with the idea.

ORDERLY.

Perhaps not. Well, nurse, what are my instructions?

NURSE.

You'd better read that paper on the wall.

ORDERLY.

I see.

NURSE.

The door just opposite is the big ward. Eight of them there. The little ward is the room at the end of the passage—to the right. [*She indicates it.*] Only two in that. They've been getting a little restless. I'm not sure that we shan't have to make a change there.

ORDERLY.

What sort of a change?

NURSE.

Well, we might put one of them in the big ward and somebody else in there. I think they're getting a bit on one another's nerves—those two. One of

N I G H T W A T C H E S

them's the deaf and dumb man, you know. You'd better have a look at him when you go round. But he's near the bell.

ORDERLY.

A deaf and dumb man?

NURSE.

Dreadful, isn't it? A shell burst near him; he wasn't wounded but he can't speak a word now and can't hear.

ORDERLY.

Will he get right?

NURSE.

They hope so. There's a chance.

ORDERLY.

Well, you're sure I needn't keep awake all the time?

NURSE.

I don't think you will.

ORDERLY.

I'll spend the night pinching myself if you tell me to.

NURSE.

Do it if you like.

ORDERLY.

You're not going?

NURSE.

Yes.

NIGHT WATCHES

ORDERLY.

Won't you sit down and have half-an-hour's chat?
Have a cup of tea?

NURSE. [*She shakes her head smilingly.*]

If there's anything wrong—anything you can't tackle—call me. There's a bell we've rigged up here to my room. See? I think you've got everything. Good night.

ORDERLY.

Good night, nurse. Thank you.

NURSE. [*She stands at the door, listening.*]

They are all sleeping. Poor boys, poor boys.

[*She goes. The orderly looks after her wistfully. He takes a turn about the room, examines the toasting-fork, takes up a book, puts it down, sits in the armchair and begins to fill his pipe thoughtfully. The curtain falls for a moment to indicate the passage of time. When it rises the orderly is dozing in the chair and the clock shows that it is half-past two. He rouses gradually and listens. A soldier pushes the door open and looks in. His dress is a rough compromise between day and night. He is youngish, a typical private, now rather perturbed. His head is bandaged.*]

ORDERLY.

What's up now?

FIRST SOLDIER.

'Scuse me, sir. [*He salutes.*] May I have a word with you, sir?

N I G H T W A T C H E S

ORDERLY.

Certainly. Come in.

FIRST SOLDIER. [*Advancing.*]

I didn't ought to be put in there with 'im.

ORDERLY.

In where? With whom?

FIRST SOLDIER.

Little ward, they call it. There's only two of us: me an' 'im.

ORDERLY.

Little ward? Well, but there's a deaf and dumb man there. He can't disturb you.

FIRST SOLDIER.

Can't he?

ORDERLY.

How can he if he's—but perhaps you're the deaf and dumb man?

FIRST SOLDIER. [*Laughs uneasily.*]

About as much as 'e is.

ORDERLY.

Do you mean to say that he's shamming?

FIRST SOLDIER.

I didn't say that. But he might be pretendin'.

ORDERLY.

He might be—What's the difference?

FIRST SOLDIER.

Well, one's worse than the other, isn't it?

NIGHT WATCHES

ORDERLY.

D'you think so? Shamming sounds worse, doesn't it?

FIRST SOLDIER.

Of course it does. I'd never say a man was shammin' unless I knew. It wouldn't be fair.

ORDERLY.

But you'd say he was pretending? Well, now, that's interesting. Sit down and explain the difference. Have a cigarette?

FIRST SOLDIER.

Thanky, sir. *[He takes one and sits down.]*

ORDERLY.

Now, then.

FIRST SOLDIER.

They wanted to get 'im out o' that big ward an' they did.

ORDERLY.

Did they? Why?

FIRST SOLDIER.

Deaf an' dumb is 'e?

ORDERLY.

Well, isn't he?

FIRST SOLDIER.

Shall I tell y' somethin', sir?

ORDERLY.

Do.

N I G H T W A T C H E S

FIRST SOLDIER.

I'm not one to blab.

ORDERLY.

No; don't blab. Just tell me.

FIRST SOLDIER.

What shall I tell y'?

ORDERLY.

Oh, heavens! Tell me the difference between shamming and pretending.

FIRST SOLDIER.

It's a rum thing. I never thought he was that sort of feller.

ORDERLY.

What sort?

FIRST SOLDIER.

You think it's only pretendin'?

ORDERLY.

What's only pretending?

FIRST SOLDIER.

Shall I tell y'?

ORDERLY.

No; not unless you like. Don't tell me anything. Go to bed.

FIRST SOLDIER.

I'm bound to tell y'.

NIGHT WATCHES

ORDERLY.

Fire away, then.

FIRST SOLDIER.

Calls himself deaf and dumb?

ORDERLY.

Does he? Funny that he should call himself anything.

FIRST SOLDIER.

He can talk right enough.

ORDERLY.

How d'you know?

FIRST SOLDIER.

I've heard him. Others too. That's what they didn't like. Them in the big ward.

ORDERLY.

When have you heard him?

FIRST SOLDIER. [*Impressively.*]

In his sleep.

ORDERLY.

I see. I see.

FIRST SOLDIER.

Thought y'd see.

ORDERLY.

Has he done it often?

FIRST SOLDIER.

Pretty reg'lar.

N I G H T W A T C H E S

ORDERLY.

Can you make out what he says?

FIRST SOLDIER.

No, he's a bit too clever for that.

ORDERLY.

Too clever? Oh, come. How can that be?

FIRST SOLDIER.

Looks like pretendin'? What?

ORDERLY.

And why not shamming? Why don't you call it shamming?

FIRST SOLDIER.

I'll tell y'. Because he's deaf right enough.

ORDERLY.

How d'you know?

FIRST SOLDIER.

'Cause y' may make a noise like hell behind 'im and he doesn't move. Y' may burst a paper bag agen 'is ear 'ole. He's deaf, 'e is, so I wouldn't go so far as to say 'e's shammin'.

ORDERLY.

Yes, I begin to see the difference.

FIRST SOLDIER.

Thought y' would.

ORDERLY.

Now, look here. I don't think he's shamming or pretending or anything.

NIGHT WATCHES

FIRST SOLDIER.

I tell y' I've 'eard 'im many a time. It used to make me go creeps. It does still but I'm more vexed now. When y' curse 'im for it he can't 'ear a word.

ORDERLY.

Look here. Have you—any of you—told him that he talks in his sleep?

FIRST SOLDIER.

Tell 'im? 'E wouldn't 'ear.

ORDERLY.

Yes, yes, yes; but you can write it. He can read, I suppose?

FIRST SOLDIER.

I don't set much store by that way of writin'.

ORDERLY.

Now, that's no reason.

FIRST SOLDIER.

I don't want 'im on to me.

ORDERLY.

What d'you mean?

FIRST SOLDIER.

You don't know what a feller like that'll do.

ORDERLY.

What have you against him?

FIRST SOLDIER. [*Testily.*]

'Aven't I been tellin' y'?

NIGHT WATCHES

ORDERLY.

Not a word.

FIRST SOLDIER.

Are you off your nut or am I?

ORDERLY.

Both of us, perhaps.

FIRST SOLDIER.

He gives out as 'e's dumb. Is 'e?

ORDERLY.

Yes. When he's awake.

FIRST SOLDIER.

Well, now—

ORDERLY.

Let me explain—or try to. What is this dumbness? He has had a great shock and it has completely shattered—paralysed—of course, I don't understand it as a doctor would or a scientific man—it has put all his nerves wrong, it has cut off—or paralysed—the connections between his will—what he wants to do—and what he can do. D'you see? Well, he's all, as it were, dithering. And then he goes to sleep.

FIRST SOLDIER.

Ah! That's it.

ORDERLY. [*Encouraged.*]

He goes to sleep. And do you know—have you thought what a beautiful thing sleep is? We relax, we sink into nature, we—you don't read Shakespeare?

N I G H T W A T C H E S

FIRST SOLDIER.

I've 'eard tell of 'im.

ORDERLY.

Well, he once wrote a play about a murderer.

FIRST SOLDIER. [*Starting.*]

A murderer!

ORDERLY.

Yes; and when this murderer knew that he would never sleep peacefully again he reeled off the most beautiful praises of sleep and what sleep could do—devil take you, I believe you're too stupid to understand.

FIRST SOLDIER.

I'll understand if you'll talk sense.

ORDERLY.

Yes. I beg your pardon. It's my fault. Well, sleep will do wonders. It will heal you, it will put things right for the time, it will help you to put them right altogether. It accomplishes miracles. You awake—and there you are again.

FIRST SOLDIER.

D'you believe all this yourself, sir?

ORDERLY.

I think so. Yes.

FIRST SOLDIER.

You said a murderer.

ORDERLY.

That was Macbeth. A chap called Macbeth.

N I G H T W A T C H E S

FIRST SOLDIER.

Talked in 'is sleep, did 'e?

ORDERLY.

Well, his wife did. She was a murderer too.

FIRST SOLDIER.

Yes, you may be sure there's summat wrong when they do that.

ORDERLY.

No, no. The most innocent people may do it.

FIRST SOLDIER.

Innercent, indeed! He's got a bad conscience, that chap.

ORDERLY.

What is a bad conscience? It's only an uncomfortable mind. Most of you have that. Most of us, I should say.

FIRST SOLDIER.

Are y' sayin' I've a bad conscience?

ORDERLY.

No; but I can believe that if you've been out to the war and seen horrible things you may have them on your mind. You may even talk in your sleep.

FIRST SOLDIER.

That's a lie.

ORDERLY.

You mustn't speak to me like that.

NIGHT WATCHES

FIRST SOLDIER. [*Saluting.*]

Beg y'r pard'n, sir.

ORDERLY.

I'm not making myself out any better than you.
I've a bad conscience.

FIRST SOLDIER.

You, sir?

ORDERLY.

Oh, this war finds us out. All the things that we
might have done or left undone.

FIRST SOLDIER.

D'you talk in y'r sleep?

ORDERLY. [*Laughing.*]

Oh! I won't admit that.

FIRST SOLDIER.

I sh'd think not.

ORDERLY.

Now, look here. You're a fair-minded man. What
have you against this poor chap in your room? Just
look at it calmly as if you were judge or jury. What
has he done?

FIRST SOLDIER.

Y' talk of 'orrible things. I've seen some and I don't
mention 'em—we tell y' a lot but there are some
things—we may 'av seen 'em or—we may 'av thought
'em. Better forget; better forget.

ORDERLY.

Well, my dear fellow, that's just it. That should
make you sympathize with him.

N I G H T W A T C H E S

FIRST SOLDIER.

Or we may 'av done 'em.

ORDERLY.

Yes, I see.

FIRST SOLDIER.

Y' can't be sure. Of anyone else I mean.

ORDERLY.

Of course you can't. You can't be sure of anything. But you musn't condemn others.

FIRST SOLDIER.

What 'as that feller seen? What 'as he done? I'm alone with 'im in that little ward. I can't make out a word, but it's talkin' right enough. I've stood over 'im listenin'. It's 'orrible langwidge. I can't make out a word. 'Ardly.

ORDERLY.

Oh! come, you know—

FIRST SOLDIER.

He's done somethin'. I know 'e 'as.

ORDERLEY.

Oh, well, my friend, if it comes to that you've done a bit of killing or tried to.

FIRST SOLDIER.

I 'ad to kill them bloody Germans.

ORDERLY.

I know that. That's all right.

N I G H T W A T C H E S

FIRST SOLDIER.

It's all so 'orrible sir that you want things to be done right. You don't want any 'anky-panky.

ORDERLY.

Yes, I see.

FIRST SOLDIER.

Them Germans! I reckon they're all like 'im.

ORDERLY.

How like him?

FIRST SOLDIER.

All talkin' in their sleep.

ORDERLY.

That's a dreadful idea.

FIRST SOLDIER.

An' there am I with 'im in the night. And in the big ward they're sleepin' peaceful. What did that Shakespeare say of sleep?

ORDERLY.

He said a lot of things.

FIRST SOLDIER.

Tell me one.

ORDERLY.

"The death of each day's life"—

FIRST SOLDIER.

An 'orrible idea. Damn 'im.

ORDERLY.

You musn't damn Shakespeare.

NIGHT WATCHES

FIRST SOLDIER.

I will if 'e talks like that. No disrespec' to you sir.
What else did 'e say?

ORDERLY.

"Sore labour's bath,
Balm of hurt minds, great nature's second course,
Chief nourisher in life's feast."

FIRST SOLDIER. [*Humbly.*]

I don't understand. [*Resentfully.*] Why, it might
be 'im talkin' in 'is sleep. [*He jerks a thumb.*]

ORDERLY.

Yes, he may be saying the most beautiful things.

FIRST SOLDIER.

Nay, 'e's a devil, that feller is.

ORDERLY.

Hullo! What 's that?

FIRST SOLDIER.

Begod, 'e's comin'.

[*They both look towards the door and the second soldier appears there. He stands surveying them timidly and yet morosely. He wears an old dressing-gown over pyjamas.*]

ORDERLY.

This is most irregular. I shall get into a row.

[*Seeing him speak the second soldier straightens himself and salutes. Then he advances slowly into the room.*]

FIRST SOLDIER. [*In a stentorian voice.*]

Y're on fire. [*The second soldier takes no notice.*]

NIGHT WATCHES

ORDERLY.

What the dickens d'you mean? You'll wake everybody.

FIRST SOLDIER.

It's all right, sir. Best try 'im now and then. He might get back 'is 'earin' sudden. I think y' may talk free before 'im now.

ORDERLY.

I don't know that I want to talk before him. I want you both to go back to bed.

FIRST SOLDIER.

I'm not goin' back before 'e does.

ORDERLY.

Why?

FIRST SOLDIER.

Lyin' there in the dark and thinkin' 'e may come in. [*The second soldier makes a gesture to indicate that he wants the other sent away. It is intended to be surreptitious, but the first soldier observes it.*] Look at that! See 'im? No, you don't. [*The second soldier fumbles in the pockets of his gown and produces a small slate and a pencil. He writes. The first soldier tries to see what he is writing, and there is a mild scuffle. The second soldier seeks the protection of the orderly, who overlooks his writing and waves the first soldier away.*] Fair do's.

ORDERLY.

Let him write.

FIRST SOLDIER.

Yes, but let me see it.

NIGHT WATCHES

ORDERLY.

Why should you?

FIRST SOLDIER.

'Tisn't polite to whisper in company.

ORDERLY.

Whisper?

FIRST SOLDIER.

Same thing if you don't let me look.

ORDERLY. [*Looking at the slate.*]

Well, the fact is he wants a little private conversation with me.

FIRST SOLDIER.

Oh! Indeed! Wants me to go? Well, I'm not 'aving any. That's straight.

ORDERLY.

If I tell you to go you'll have to.

FIRST SOLDIER.

Cert'nly, sir; but he oughtn't to write about me be'ind my back.

ORDERLY.

You've been talking about him behind his back.

FIRST SOLDIER.

Yes, but he couldn't 'ear any 'ow.

ORDERLY.

What's that to do with it?

NIGHT WATCHES

FIRST SOLDIER.

An' I can read writin'.

ORDERLY.

Your distinctions are too fine for me.

[The second soldier has been writing on the slate, and now hands it to the orderly, who reads and laughs.]

FIRST SOLDIER.

What's he say?

ORDERLY.

He says you're very restless and he thinks you have something on your mind.

FIRST SOLDIER.

Well, I never.

ORDERLY.

He says he doesn't know what you've been doing, but you must have a bad conscience.

FIRST SOLDIER.

'E's like them Germans. They always say as it's us does their dirty tricks. P'raps 'e is one.

ORDERLY.

Now, you've no right to say that.

FIRST SOLDIER.

No, sir; I 'aven't. *[The second soldier grasps the slate again, rubs out his messages with fingers moistened at his mouth and writes eagerly. The first soldier manages to look over. He backs away. Feebly.]* 'E says I'm a bad man.

NIGHT WATCHES

ORDERLY. [*Looking at the slate as the second soldier writes.*]

He says he caught you bending over him and going to stick something in him.

FIRST SOLDIER.
'E's a liar.

ORDERLY.
And that you must be sent away.

FIRST SOLDIER.
I'll bash 'is 'ed in.

ORDERLY.
Silence.

[The two soldiers glare at one another, snarling and menacing. The orderly steps between.]

FIRST SOLDIER.
If 'e wants a scrap I'm 'is man.

ORDERLY.
You two fools. [*To first soldier.*] You should be sorry for the poor fellow. It's the old tale. Fear breeds cruelty.

FIRST SOLDIER.
Fear!

ORDERLY.
Yes, fear. You're brave enough when it comes to killing Germans, I daresay, but you're afraid of nothing at all. There's something here you can't understand, and, like a coward, you blame this poor

NIGHT WATCHES

fellow. You should help him. He's your comrade—your pal. It's the way with all of us. We fear and fear and then we'll do any beastly cruel thing.

[He takes the slate and pencil and begins to write.]

FIRST SOLDIER. *[Sullenly.]*
What 'r y' tellin' 'im?

ORDERLY.
Very much what I've been saying to you.

FIRST SOLDIER.
I 'aven't touched 'im.

ORDERLY.
Why! If you two fellows were back in the trenches together you'd die for one another.

[He gives the slate to the second soldier, who reads it, grabs the pencil, turns to the other side of the slate and writes furiously.]

FIRST SOLDIER.
I dessay. What's 'e writin' now?

ORDERLY.
I don't know.

[The second soldier throws the slate on the table and moves towards the door. The first soldier tries to get it, but the orderly is before him.]

FIRST SOLDIER.
What's 'e say?

NIGHT WATCHES

ORDERLY. [*Angrily in a loud voice to second soldier after reading.*]

Don't be a fool. Deuce take it, I'm forgetting now.

FIRST SOLDIER.

What *does* 'e say?

ORDERLY.

He says he'll blow his brains out.

FIRST SOLDIER. [*Daunted.*]

I don't wish 'im no 'arm. Not a bit.

[*The orderly gets hold of the second soldier and leads him forward to a chair toward the front, where he sits down dejectedly. The orderly picks up the slate.*]

ORDERLY.

Where's that pencil?

[*As he is looking for it the first soldier, who has been in a state of uncomfortable hesitancy, approaches the second soldier from behind and brings his mouth close to the other's ear.*]

FIRST SOLDIER. [*In a terrific voice.*]

Bill! [*The second soldier starts slightly and then rises unsteadily. He turns slowly to look at the first soldier. In an awed voice.*] 'E 'eard me. [*Trembling, the second soldier stretches out his hand for the slate. The orderly hands him the pencil and he tries to write, but his agitation overcomes him and he sits down. In the meantime the first soldier empties the bag of biscuits and again approaches the second soldier, this time blowing out the bag into a balloon. He explodes it at ear of the second soldier, who rises again and sees the torn bag.*]

NIGHT WATCHES

With an inarticulate cry he falls on the neck of the first soldier.] I made 'im 'ear.

[They waltz round the room together and passing the orderly drag him in. He joins in the dance and they knock over a chair or two. The nurse in dressing-gown, etc., enters.

NURSE.
Well!

[They separate, looking rather sheepish, but the first soldier soon recovers and cautiously gets hold of the poker and tongs.

ORDERLY.
You've caught us this time, nurse.

NURSE.
Whatever are you doing; You'll wake everybody. Really, sir—

ORDERLY.
Oh, you must forgive us, nurse. There's been a great reconciliation. And more than that.

[The second soldier seizes the nurse's arm. He simulates shouting, taps his ears and gesticulates explanations and delight.

NURSE.
Can he hear?

ORDERLY.
Not much yet, but something.

[The first soldier makes a sudden and great clanging with the fire-irons.

NIGHT WATCHES

NURSE.

Whatever's that?

ORDERLY.

Stop, confound you.

FIRST SOLDIER.

Give 'im a bit o' pleasure.

[The two soldiers shake hands.]

NURSE.

Well, I don't know what to say. It's most irregular.

ORDERLY.

Report us, nurse; report us. Blame me.

FIRST SOLDIER. *[Confidentially, to orderly.]*

'E's not 'alf a bad chap.

[The two soldiers shake hands.]

NURSE.

Now, you two be off to bed. *[She gesticulates to the second soldier.]* Where's his slate? The pencil?

FIRST SOLDIER.

Oh, never mind that! 'E'll be talkin' d'rectly. 'E talks in 'is sleep now. My Gawd! I used to be frightened of 'im. At nights you get thinkin'.

NURSE.

Well, be off, be off, that's good boys.

[They start off arm in arm.]

FIRST SOLDIER. *[Turning.]*

What time may I start talkin' to 'im?

NIGHT WATCHES

NURSE.

What time?

FIRST SOLDIER.

Yes, I'm goin' to make 'im 'ear proper in the mornin'.

NURSE.

I'll box your ears if I hear a sound before eight o'clock.

FIRST SOLDIER.

Well, look out then.

[They go off laughing.]

ORDERLY.

You'll have to report me.

NURSE.

Shall I?

ORDERLY.

Won't you? We must have awakened all of them?

NURSE.

It wasn't quite so bad as shells bursting, after all.

ORDERLY.

Well, do you want a full explanation?

NURSE.

It'll do in the morning. You can make a report. But I think I know. *[She goes to the door and listens.]*
They're all sleeping quietly.

ORDERLY.

Good lads!

N I G H T W A T C H E S

NURSE.

They've all sorts of fancies. They're so different in the daytime. Now—they're breathing like one. Even those two—very soon they'll be asleep.

ORDERLY.

We're groping among strange things, nurse.

NURSE.

I don't know that I understand you. They're like children to me. These two naughty ones—well, you know what I mean.

ORDERLY.

Do I? Don't let us understand everything.

NURSE.

Good night, again.

ORDERLY.

Good night, nurse.

NURSE. [*Going.*]

You have a cup of tea now and that toast.

ORDERLY.

Am I one of your children too?

NURSE.

Are you wounded and ill?

ORDERLY.

No; only rather melancholy.

N I G H T W A T C H E S

NURSE. [*She shakes her head.*]

Try a cup of tea.

[*She goes out. The orderly gazes after her.
Then he lifts up the teapot and looks at
it. The curtain falls.*]



THE CHOICE

A PLAY IN ONE ACT

CHARACTERS

MRS. LILLEY.

ELLA CHRISTIE.

ANNE.

MAJOR GREIG.

THE CHOICE

SCENE

The sitting-room of a country cottage. There is a French window leading into the garden at the back, and a door at the side of the scene.

ELLA comes through the garden entrance with flowers in her hands. ANNE (middle-aged) enters from the side door with a letter on a tray. She offers it to ELLA.

ANNE.

THE postman says it's been delayed, Miss Ella. You see it's addressed to you at Mrs. Leslie's.

ELLA.

Leslie—Lilley. They're not very near. Well—put it down please, Anne. I suppose it's somebody that doesn't know——

[She glances at the letter which ANNE has put on the table and some of the flowers fall from her hands.]

ANNE.

It is for you all right, Miss, I suppose?

ELLA.

It's for me, sure enough, Anne.

THE CHOICE

ANNE.

Well, I do hope it's not anything to call you away, Miss Ella—if I may say so. You know it's done the mistress a world of good to have you here. She holds her head very high and yet she frets since Mr. Walter's death—and, oh dear! I shouldn't speak of it to you. What am I thinking of? Forgive me, Miss Ella.

ELLA.

Since Mr. Walter's death?

ANNE.

Well, when anyone's there she seems proud and almost happy like, but not when she's alone. And she's different with you—more natural, because, of course, you too—but oh! Miss Ella, you're young. I'm talking to you very free—you're young. A mother's not the same.

ELLA.

I'm young. Well?

ANNE.

I don't care, Miss Ella, if you do think me cheeky. I do care but I can't stop. I've known you since you were a girl and him too—poor young man—ever since his father died. I mind the day Mr. Walter went off to fight against them Boers and she said to me—the mistress said—"Anne, I shall never see him again." I said "Nonsense, ma'am," but I believed her. I never saw anyone look like him. Miss Ella, he didn't like going and no wonder—leaving you behind and you only engaged a month. But now, Miss Ella, you'll forgive me, and I've known you a long time, and what I do say is—one's enough to go

THE CHOICE

on sorrowing. His mother—well, she's got nothing else. But I do say—and you may be angry if you like—I wish that letter there was from another—from your sweetheart—there!

ELLA. [*After a short pause.*]
How do you know it isn't, Anne?

ANNE.
Oh! Miss Ella, is it?

ELLA.
Well, perhaps he would like to be.

ANNE.
Then if he's good and if you like him don't send him away. I'm speaking as one woman to another. Don't miss the chance. You'd have plenty more—but if you do like him—

MRS. LILLEY *enters*.

MRS. LILLEY.
Was it the postman, Anne?

ANNE.
It was a letter for Miss Ella, ma'am. [*Exit ANNE.*]

ELLA.
It's from Major Greig.

MRS. LILLEY.
Ah! my dear Ella—and you havn't opened it.

ELLA.
I've hardly had time. Anne has been talking to me, and besides, I'm trying to think a bit first.

THE CHOICE

MRS. LILLEY.

Let me help you.

ELLA. [*Takes up the letter.*]

He's got your name wrong—Mrs. Leslie. I wonder how he got your address. And I came here to be quiet and to think and to talk to you. I don't know whether I am glad or sorry that he has found me out. Anne says it has been good for you—my being here—but I came quite selfishly. I wanted to see things through your eyes.

MRS. LILLEY.

My dear, what I can say is only, again and again, Walter is dead and you are young.

ELLA.

It's fine of you to say it. And yet—yes, there are times when you want me to leave you alone. I think I understand you. I shall never forget Walter—no—you don't want that. But if I—well, if I marry you'll seem to have him more to yourself. You want that. You love me, but you would like me out of the way. You are a little jealous, you know.

MRS. LILLEY.

I'm his mother, my dear, and you are young. It's all natural.

ELLA.

Yes, I'm young. I keep hearing that. Oh! I know it's intolerable to renounce youth. I can't live on memories, I know. And yet—it seems like giving him up. It's a kind of treachery. I want a milder word. Fickle? But I wouldn't have been fickle.

THE CHOICE

MRS. LILLEY.

No, no, my dear. He would have wished for this. Nay, I am confident he does wish it. He wants you to be happy. This Major Greig—I should like to see him. I only want to know that he's good enough for you and then—— Ella, was he at the War? Do you think he could ever have met Walter?

ELLA.

He was at the war. He won't talk about it.

MRS. LILLEY.

No, these brave men won't talk. If Walter had come home we should never have got anything out of him. But it's hard that we shouldn't know how it all happened. I think they might have found out more. I thought if I'd gone out there—but it's too late now. I know he died nobly—heroically. I know that. Had Major Greig heard of him?

ELLA.

Of Walter? I never spoke of him. He knows I was engaged, but I never mentioned Walter's name.

MRS. LILLEY.

Of course, he hadn't time to make himself famous.

ANNE enters

ANNE.

If you please, ma'am, there's a gentleman at the garden gate. He seems to be looking at the house, but he doesn't come in.

THE CHOICE

MRS. LILLEY.

Ask him if there is anything we can do for him, Anne.

[ANNE approaches the garden entrance, but
ELLA is there before her and looks out.

ELLA.

It's Major Greig.

MRS. LILLEY.

Oh! go and bring him in, Ella. [ELLA does not stir.]
Then I will. [She goes out.]

ANNE.

Oh! Is it him, Miss Ella?

ELLA.

Hush! Anne.

ANNE.

Oh, Miss Ella, I wish I could be at hand to advise you.

ELLA.

Well, really! Anne. [She laughs.] I'll call you if I'm in any difficulty.

ANNE.

Do, Miss.

[ANNE goes out as MRS. LILLEY returns
through the garden entrance with
MAJOR GREIG.

GREIG.

It's extremely good of you. I thought this must be the house, but the people I asked didn't know your

THE CHOICE

name. Ah! [*He sees ELLA and comes forward to her. They shake hands.*] You got my letter? I hope Miss Christie has already made my apologies for such an unceremonious visit, Mrs. Leslie.

ELLA.

Your letter's there. It's just come.

GREIG.

I thought you'd get it this morning. It doesn't matter. It was only to say——. [*He looks at Mrs. LILLEY with friendly, inquiring eyes. She smiles responsively and he laughs.*] I had to come, you see.

MRS. LILLEY.

And we're delighted to see you, Major Greig. We have tea at half-past four, and till then—where are you, by the by? The Dragon? Yes. Well, come here whenever you can. You've found the best way—through the garden. You and Ella will want to talk and I must have my afternoon nap.

[*She nods and smiles and goes out.*]

GREIG.

That's a very charming lady.

ELLA.

She's a dear woman.

GREIG.

Well, I've found you out, you see.

ELLA.

Was I in hiding?

GREIG.

You didn't tell me where you were going.

T H E C H O I C E

ELLA.

And why should I?

GREIG.

Because you knew it interested me enormously.

ELLA.

It would have been foolish of me to tell you.

GREIG.

Why?

ELLA.

Because I came here to get away from you.

GREIG. [*After a pause.*]

Why?

ELLA.

I wanted to be alone—to think. Or, rather, I wanted to see myself from outside—with another's eyes.

GREIG.

Whose eyes? This old lady's?

ELLA.

Yes.

GREIG.

I don't quite understand, but whatever you do is right, I'm sure. She's a charming, sad old creature. And, of course, you do well to think—to pause. I agree with that. I want you to look at it every way and to look at me too. My dear, my dear girl, there are lots of things about me that ought to be better, but I'm pretty sound. If you like me enough you won't reject me on examination. It's the conven-

THE CHOICE

tional thing to say that you're far too good for me, and I'll say it. You are—and yet—I don't know. A man is tossed about in the world; he goes through black, grim things and he comes back to this—to you. It's peaceful here and the sun shines on the pretty little garden, and you are dainty and beautiful, and have been all the time. Here I am and I'm all right, but it hasn't been all rosewater. I hardly know the woman's point of view. What should such fellows as I do crawling between heaven and earth? And yet it's poor fun for you to go into a nunnery.

ELLA.

A nunnery? Yes. If I had been a French girl I might have thought of a nunnery.

GREIG.

I believe we are a little bit at cross purposes yet.

ELLA.

I told you that I had been engaged and that he—my lover—died.

GREIG.

Yes.

ELLA.

He was the son of the lady you have just seen.

GREIG.

I might have guessed that.

ELLA.

She is good to me. She doesn't reproach me though she knows about you. I think, sometimes, that she likes to believe that she alone is worthy to cherish—to remember him.

T H E C H O I C E

GREIG.

Why should she reproach you?

ELLA.

He was her son.

GREIG.

Do you think so poorly of mothers?

ELLA.

I suppose you're right. Yet when I told her about you it seemed a humiliation. Can't you understand? Oh! it's unfair to you, I know. I want to make my confessions.

GREIG.

Your confessions?

ELLA.

No. They're not that, but I feel that there's something to be said. I've not talked to you about it, but you know I belonged to him and not half-heartedly. And to come to you now! I resent that you should efface him like this and yet—and yet— Oh! I can't be right and happy anyhow. And it's so unfair to you. It's all a jumble in my mind. I'm stupid and unintelligible. I want to be frank with you and I've nothing to say and there are infinite things to be said.

GREIG.

Don't say them if they hurt you. I think I can understand and imagine a good deal. And don't let us have too much of this looking backward. Confessions! I suppose that when people marry it's the time to make a clean breast of it. I might suspect you—I don't, I don't—I might suspect you of making

THE CHOICE

a kind of sham confession to bring out my real one. No—no. Don't think I suspect it. I knew this must come and I've dreaded it. Probably I'm quite wrong to tell you, but I can't help it. I'm afraid I alarm you. It's nothing now, it's all over. You're a generous woman and not a squeamish one. You won't judge too rapidly—instinctively—against me. It's an incident—a strange incident. Oh! nothing to do with a woman.

ELLA.

I'm not unforgiving. I could forgive you a good deal. But tell me—quickly.

GREIG.

I've not talked to you much about the war. Out there a man may see some queer things. He may do some queer things that never see the light. They're not part of the romantic convention.

ELLA.

I'm not afraid of anything you've done.

GREIG.

No. You're a priceless woman—a woman apart. I think I'm not afraid to tell you. There's dirty work to be done in the world. There's blood to be shed, poor hapless things to be struck down. [*Pause.*] Do you know, your hostess's face—Mrs. Leslie—gave me a little shock when I saw her. She reminded me of a boy—

ELLA.

Oh! Tell me and be done. You stray from the point.

THE CHOICE

GREIG.

Not entirely. Mrs. Leslie——

ELLA.

Mrs. Lilley. .

GREIG.

What?

ELLA.

It's Mrs. Lilley. You keep saying Mrs. Leslie.

GREIG.

Her name is Lilley?

ELLA.

Yes. You got it wrong.

GREIG.

She had a son—of course. What am I thinking about? He died—where?

ELLA.

Do you forget that I told you I was to marry him?

GREIG.

And he died?——

ELLA.

He was killed in South Africa.

GREIG. [*Staring at her.*]

Yes, yes, of course, of course.

ELLA.

Go on. Go on.

T H E C H O I C E

GREIG.

Well, what was I saying? There's not much to be said. One feels it that way, you know. Here you are all spick and span, and there are we hacking and slashing. Of course there isn't much of that nowadays. The sword—the sword, you know, is rather an antiquated instrument——

ELLA. [*Goes to him and seizes his arm.*]

Will you tell me what you were going to say?

GREIG.

I was saying that we have to do a bit of dirty work. You can't touch pitch without being a bit defiled, you know.

ELLA.

What are you keeping back? What is it? What do you mean? Why do you talk this rubbish? There's something about him. What is it?

GREIG.

About whom?

ELLA.

You know. Walter Lilley.

GREIG.

Not at all. I assure you—you're quite mistaken——

ELLA.

Oh! It's useless—useless. You are lying. I see it. I know it. What did you do? Don't think you can keep it from me. I must know; can't you see that? Go on.

T H E C H O I C E

GREIG.

I can't go on.

ELLA.

Is he alive?

GREIG.

No.

ELLA.

Tell me of him. Tell me of Walter Lilley. Walter
—Walter Lilley.

GREIG.

You think only of him.

ELLA.

Of him? Only of him? No—oh! no--of you too.
This is horrible. You lost him? You deserted him?
Oh! don't let me guess such things. Worse than
that? You couldn't kill him? That's impossible;
you were on the same side.

GREIG.

You confuse me. Give me a moment's peace.

ELLA. [*She sinks into a chair watching him.*]

The truth.

GREIG.

I've believed in the truth all my life: it's helped me
out of some bad places. I only want to help you.

ELLA.

The truth.

THE CHOICE

GREIG.

I might concoct some story even now, but I won't. The truth is very bitter and ugly. I tell you, and I'm a broken man—but you—well, you're a woman to do and bear great things.

ELLA.

I can wait no longer.

GREIG.

It was when I was with Riddick in the Transvaal. He gave me a ticklish job. We were at a place called Edderdorp. Perhaps you remember that there was an engagement there. I had to make a march with a kind of dummy convoy. It was meant to draw the Boers, and Riddick only gave me enough men to make a show. The wagons were empty. The main force went another way to catch them if they drew out to attack us. It was a good notion, but of course we stood the chance of being mauled before the real business began. Among others I had given me a dozen men of Bilton's horse. I wouldn't have taken them had I known that they had never been in action. Let me come to the point. We were attacked—prematurely, I think—as we rested for a meal, and I ordered an advance. It was awkward. It didn't look nice. These raw lads—to go into action for the first time is uncomfortable work anyhow—I couldn't steady them. There was one who wouldn't—or couldn't—mount. I think now that he was paralysed with fear—that he was physically incapable. It's pitiable: there are such cases. The thing was hurried, confused: you can hardly understand: everything hung in the balance. The fellows had their orders but it was a question which way they would ride. I had my revolver out. I shall never forget that boy's

THE CHOICE

face: it was enough to unman a battalion. For God's sake let me make myself clear—I can't go over it twice—his name was Walter Lilley. I had no pity, I think, but I did right: I did what I must. I shot him in the head.

ELLA. [*Rises.*]

You killed him? You killed him? You?

GREIG.

I killed him. Yes. Take care what you say. Wait, stop.

ELLA.

As if the words mattered.

GREIG.

Don't they? Don't the words matter? I think you might make me miserable for ever with a word.

ELLA.

Murderer.

[*A pause.*]

GREIG.

No. You are right. It's only a word. What else could you say? What else could I hope for—now? You can't be infinitely wise and charitable in a moment. There seemed to be no other way. There are no reserves now: it's only truth that can help us.

ELLA.

Go—go.

GREIG.

Not now. Not yet. I must say something. How can I leave you to remember me so? You're not

THE CHOICE

cruel, you'll pity me, and I only ask for justice. The thing's bigger than ourselves: it wasn't for myself I struck. Do you know that many a time since I've said to myself that it was for England. Well, I say it to you now. Is this a false note? I'm confused and I want to put my case and I'm losing precious time: I might say something that you'd remember and think over. Does it all seem monstrous to you? It's all over, of course, and I must go, but I can't bear that you should think of me like that.

ELLA.

And he served England too. Ah! You don't understand how it is with me. We should fly apart like two guilty creatures—two murderers.

GREIG.

Two?

ELLA. [*After a short pause.*]

I made him go. I knew he was not—not very courageous. He went to please me—to propitiate me. I wanted him to conquer himself. Wasn't it brave, wasn't it noble of him? I sacrificed him. Hush! Hush! There's someone moving—Mrs. Lilley. She mustn't know: she must never know. Will it come out? Can it be kept secret?

GREIG.

It won't come out. There was a kind of private enquiry and a swearing to secrecy. The truth is that not many of us were left—but we did the work all right. If anyone blabbed I've men I could trust to contradict it. Of course I'm not thinking of myself. And I'm ready to swear on the Book that he died heroically.

THE CHOICE

ELLA.

And he did—he did. It's his agony that I can't bear—that moment when he couldn't—he couldn't—were you in a passion? I don't understand.

GREIG.

Would you dwell on it? Understand that we were in a desperate strait, and that a big disaster might have followed our failure: the whole thing depended on us. I don't want merely to make a case: I'm ready to confess to the uttermost. I believe I was conscious of doing a big, fine thing. No—one has emotions afterwards and it's hard to distinguish. There are times when I'm haunted like a criminal.

ELLA.

Hush!

[MRS. LILLEY enters with a photograph in her hand.]

MRS. LILLEY.

Pardon me. I was afraid that Major Greig might go before I had the opportunity to speak to him again. But you did say you would stay to tea, I think.

GREIG. [*Glancing at ELLA.*]

I'm afraid that I shall have to go directly, Mrs. Lilley.

MRS. LILLEY.

Well, then, come back and dine. The Dragon's a dreary place in the evening, I should think. Ella [*She turns to ELLA and pauses, looking intently at her for a moment.*] you must persuade Major Greig to come.

T H E C H O I C E

ELLA.

If you can't, dear——

[MRS. LILLEY looks from one to the other
silently and then at the photograph in
her hands.]

MRS. LILLEY.

You were in South Africa, Major Greig?

GREIG.

For nearly two years.

MRS. LILLEY.

Of course it's a big place. You know I lost my son there. Ella has told you, perhaps.

GREIG.

have been grieved to hear it, Mrs. Lilley.

MRS. LILLEY. [*Anxiously.*]

Did you meet him? Did you know him? He was in Bilton's Horse—Walter Lilley.

GREIG.

No, I don't think I ever met him.

MRS. LILLEY.

I have a photograph here. It was taken just before he went out. Possibly you might——

[*She hands it to him.*]

GREIG. [*Takes photograph. A pause.*]

No. I think I should have remembered him.

MRS. LILLEY.

We never heard how it happened, Major. That's hard, isn't it? They told us what they could, but it

THE CHOICE

wasn't much. It was at Edderdorp—he fell in the battle there. I should have liked to know. I know he died bravely. I don't complain of my sacrifice. Many mothers made it. Well, I thought you might have heard. I shall never know now.

GREIG. [*Slowly and stumblingly, still holding the photograph in his hand.*]

Mrs. Lilley, it's enough that he went out there—on a generous impulse—to serve his country and that he died. It can't help you to know the manner of his death; that's nothing—nothing. He went out: he did what he could. Success and failure were inextricably mixed. There were deaths that seemed fine and picturesque—they almost brought the illusion of happiness: and some that seemed common or terrible or ignoble. I don't want to distinguish: they were all my comrades. [*He gives her the photograph.*]

MRS. LILLEY.

I shall like to think of you as his comrade.

[GREIG bows. MRS. LILLEY looks from one to the other, bows, and goes out.]

GREIG.

I feel it's impossible to go: I know it's impossible to stay.

ELLA.

She must never know. It would be too terrible for her. [*Rises.*]

GREIG.

And for you?

T H E C H O I C E

ELLA.

I'm sorry for you now. No, it would be worse for her than for me. Now that you're going I want to unsay some things. I wouldn't do it but I shan't see you again. I don't want you to think of what I've said. [*She breaks off.*] Oh! He failed, then, he failed. And you were strong and terrible and angry. You towered above him. I resent that. I hate those strong and masterful men. But it's not dreadful enough to me. I don't feel it enough. No—I don't rightly know what I'm saying. Why are you here? Why do you stay?

GREIG.

Good-bye, then? [*ELLA sits down, not looking at him. GREIG finds his hat and stick and walks towards the garden entrance. He pauses there. Then he comes forward and speaks emphatically.*] No!

[*ELLA starts and looks round. GREIG puts down his hat and stick.*]

ELLA.

What is it? What's the matter?

GREIG.

I have decided that I won't go. It's not all over.

ELLA.

I don't understand what you mean by that. Are you mad?

GREIG.

I am sane to the very heart of me, and you must be too.

ELLA.

Oh! leave me in peace. I can bear no more.

T H E C H O I C E

GREIG.

It must be now. I should be a fool to leave you, and if I did I should come back. But it's to be now. What! Is this poor lad and his memory to be the end of you? I'll yield to another man—never to a shadow. I've seen him and I know him: those were your salad days. A poor weak lad that you mothered and yet—capable of effort, capable of agony. We must face that, if it has to be faced, together. I could go mad and melancholy myself about it. Don't let me do that. Don't leave me alone.

ELLA.

I can't listen to this.

GREIG.

But you must. You must listen. This is your chance—our chance. I'm appealing to your reason. And it's not only to your reason. I'm your lover—I—I—not another. Oh! my dear, be frank, be honest now. Don't think of people condemning you. Think of me: help me. I wouldn't ask it but it's life for you and not death. Don't choose a death by inches. Don't follow this dear old lady and live on photographs and bits of faded ribbon and locks of hair. I can offer you something better.

ELLA.

Oh! this is impossible.

GREIG.

No. It's a sharp turn: it's a sudden call on all your faculties—on your character.

ELLA.

It's intolerable. What woman ever submitted to such solicitations? What woman would marry the man who had killed her lover?

THE CHOICE

GREIG.

A thousand. The history of the world's full of them.

ELLA.

What can you mean?

GREIG.

Did you never hear of the Sabine women? The Romans killed the men and the women made them good wives. A legend? But there's truth in it. And how many times in the primitive strife for a mate has the stronger struck the weaker down? You think this an insult? It would be to any bread-and-butter miss: you're different. The world's a great place. My parallels aren't parallels, I daresay, but you'll understand. It's true I killed the poor lad: it's a pity, but—great God!—what is he to us now? You have to think of me. I'm not the worse for it. You would have forgiven some lapse that showed I was crumbling away—my brain, my heart.

ELLA. [*Slowly.*]

You can't dispose of memories and affections like that.

GREIG.

That's it. Begin to argue. That's what I want.

ELLA.

This is no case for reason.

GREIG.

It is.

ELLA.

I want to treat you respectfully—kindly—but——

THE CHOICE

GREIG.

But it's a concession that you fear to make.

ELLA.

You've startled me. How can I reason or think?

GREIG.

Your deepest instinct will do.

ELLA.

I can't live as fast as this. I can't move at this rate.

GREIG.

You can live as fast as thought.

ELLA.

Why! You're like Richard the Third in the play and I'm the wretched Lady Anne, I suppose. Are you preparing to crow over me?

GREIG.

I'm past timidities and squeamishness. Let us believe in ourselves.

ELLA.

The all-conquering male!

GREIG.

You're fencing. You don't think so of me.

ELLA. [*After a pause.*]

I think I understand. I see your point of view. Nay, I could almost see it as possible——

GREIG. [*Interrupting.*]

Why! then——

THE CHOICE

ELLA.

Stop! I can almost see myself in a mood to consent. Yes. I can see it as you see it—a great chance. It'll be misery for me either way. If it were a matter of a moment you might overcome me. But it's not. We should have to get through the years and we couldn't be excited all the time. Oh! yes. You can be eloquent and rouse me, but there are the long, quiet days, there would be time to think. You couldn't always be with me.

GREIG.

We must risk something, of course.

ELLA.

For every little thing in which you displeased me a great resentment would come rushing up—it would always be just out of sight.

GREIG.

We'll chance that.

ELLA.

It's not possible.

GREIG.

All these are vapourish things and we'll forget them together. We'll go where you please—do what you please. And it's happiness that I offer you—a home—children.

ELLA.

I will not. I will not.

THE CHOICE

GREIG.
Come.

[He takes her hands and draws her towards him. She yields for a moment and then breaks away towards the door.]

ELLA. *[Cries out.]*
Mother! Oh! Mother!

GREIG.
Whom are you calling? What do you want?

ELLA.
I must tell her. I must tell her everything.

GREIG.
Who?

ELLA.
I call her mother.

GREIG.
What! What can you mean?

ELLA.
I'm yielding to you. I will not yield. I will not.

GREIG.
But Mrs. Lilley! You forget——

ELLA.
If I tell her I'm safe from you: I could never do it then.

GREIG.
But think of her!

T H E C H O I C E

ELLA.

Myself! I'll think of myself. I want to possess myself. I want to be alone.

GREIG.

I'll leave you then.

ELLA.

You promise not to return.

GREIG.

No.

ELLA.

I tell her then.

GREIG.

It's monstrous. It's unthinkable. You can't do it.

ELLA.

You promise?

GREIG.

No.

ELLA. [*Again making for the door.*]

Come! oh! come, mother!

GREIG. [*Dragging her back.*]

You must not. You shall not do this.

ELLA. [*Cries out.*]

He killed him! He killed Walter. He killed Walter

GREIG.

Stop—stop. I beg you—I entreat you—I couldn't bear that. I'll go. I'll leave you. I promise. Any-

T H E C H O I C E

thing but this. But it's not fair—it's not fair. She's coming—be silent—she's coming.

MRS. LILLEY *enters hurriedly.* ELLA *sinks down sobbing.*

MRS. LILLEY.

What is it, Ella? What is it? You cried out. I heard Walter's name. What is it?

ELLA.

Oh help me! Help me!

GREIG. [*Standing beside ELLA.*]

Mrs. Lilley, I am an unfortunate man. I have distressed her with my appeals. It's a shame that you should be called in: it's my fault. She cannot make this sacrifice—this sacrifice of an ideal. I have been importunate and she resents it. I'm punished. I must go and I shall not return.

MRS. LILLEY.

But I had hoped—Ella, dear——

ELLA.

It can't be.

GREIG.

Good-bye, Mrs. Lilley. I can never forget your kindness. [*He walks to where ELLA is sitting and stands beside her.*] It's good-bye, then?

[MRS. LILLEY *watching them goes quickly out of the room.*]

ELLA.

Good-bye.

T H E C H O I C E

GREIG.

I'll only say this. If you see, if you feel that I'm right, you'll not hold off in pride and—resentment. I leave you now and I shan't molest you. I shall be waiting, always, for a word.

ELLA. [*Stands.*]

Anything but that. Everything but that.

GREIG.

What is everything?

ELLA.

Oh! I admire you. You're a great, strong man. My weakness won't let me come up to your ideal. I'm the wrong woman, and I see that so clearly now that I don't fear you any more. Poor Mrs. Lilley is safe from me. I was madly wicked to think of telling her.

GREIG.

You don't fear me now?

ELLA.

I don't think I do.

GREIG.

Then you don't forbid me to see you?

ELLA.

Oh! I can't bear to have it all over again.

GREIG.

Good-bye.

[*He gathers hat and stick and goes out slowly the garden way, turning to look at her but not stopping.*]

THE CHOICE

MRS. LILLEY. [*Entering.*]
He has gone?

ELLA.
Yes.

MRS. LILLEY.
My poor Ella. You've sent him away?

ELLA.
Yes.

MRS. LILLEY.
But, Ella, our dear Walter would have rejoiced in it. I can believe that this is a disappointment to him as it is to me. Ella, think that he, too, desires your happiness.

ELLA.
Oh! my dear, you don't know what you're saying.

MRS. LILLEY.
Well, well—perhaps he will come back.
[ELLA *walks slowly to the window entrance*
and stands looking out.]



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